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||| Rudolf Mrázek. *A Certain Age: Colonial Jakarta through the Memories of Its Intellectuals*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010, 328p. |||

When embarking upon the research for *A Certain Age*, historian Rudolf Mrázek envisioned quite a different book from the one he ended up writing. From 1992 to 2000, he interviewed over 70 Indonesian men and women who had lived through the changes from Dutch colonial rule to Japanese occupation to independence. He expected to hear first-hand accounts of great transformations: “the transition to modernity, from colonialism to postcolonialism . . . the failed (or unfinished) Indonesian revolution.” However, in the course of these dozens of meandering reminiscences, he “stumbled across a particular landscape” that came to move him intensely. Instead of a conventional narrative of modernization, he offers us a meditation on memory and its vagaries. In addition, by interweaving Indonesian memories with the insights of European avant-garde intellectuals such as Benjamin, Le Corbusier, and Proust, he invites us to reflect on the nature of modernity itself, to reconsider it from the perspective of a coloniality that he sees as often anticipating the metropole.

For this reviewer, ever intruding while reading *A Certain Age* were flashbacks to the interviews in Curtis Levy’s documentary series *Riding the Tiger* (Australia, 1992) on modern Indonesian history; the series gathered reminiscences of the same time span from much the same type of eyewitness as appear in Mrázek’s book (indeed the very same eyewitnesses, in the case of

Roeslan Abdulgani, Sukarno’s UN ambassador, and Father Mangunwijaya, the renowned author). Perhaps Mrázek at first intended to produce what would amount to an expansion in book form of the work of historical recovery that that documentary series was. However, while *Riding the Tiger* argues a clear thesis that Indonesia’s military dictatorship finds its origins in indigenous feudalism, Dutch colonialism, and Japanese militarism, *A Certain Age* by contrast merely suggests or proposes its theses or, better, simply raises questions. The open-ended, ambiguous nature of the work is reflected in the very title: what exactly does the author mean by the phrase “a certain age”? The late colonial era being recollected? The moment of recollecting itself, the last years of the Suharto regime and its immediate aftermath? The physical age of the interviewees themselves, in their seventies and eighties, that particular degree of distance from the world being recalled? Even, a late colonial age of seeming “certainties,” such as the apparent permanence of Dutch domination? The modifier “a certain . . .” itself alludes to imprecision, to the slipperiness of what one is trying to capture.

While the multivalent title does justice to the content of the book, the subtitle, “Colonial Jakarta Through the Memories of Its Intellectuals” hints at a narrower book than Mrázek actually provides. His interviewees recall provincial towns almost as much as Batavia/Jakarta itself; particularly prominent is not surprisingly Bandung, the “Paris of the East,” “more *du jour* than the metropolis,” but even the Boven Digoel prison camp on the New Guinea periphery appears. The term “Intellectuals” suggests that Indonesian equivalents of Benjamin and Adorno will be cited, but in fact the interviewees come from a wide range of occupational backgrounds: aristocrats, officials, generals, businessmen, even a *kroncong* songwriter (Gesang). The book also represents the ethnic diversity of the late colonial milieu, including Chinese Indonesians (e.g. Dr. Ong Hok Ham) and Arab Indonesians (e.g. Hamid Algadri) as well as Dutch who had “gone native” (e.g. Professor G.J. Resink whose family went back two centuries in the Indies and Poncke Prinsen who defected to the Indo-

nesian revolutionary forces). Perhaps the more catch-all category “intelligentsia” would have been more accurate than “intellectuals.” In any case, the interviewees, in sharing schooling in the Dutch language, certainly constituted an “elite” within Indies society, no matter how humble their individual circumstances may actually have been (some interviewees, for instance, speak of only wearing shoes to the classroom).

Mrázek organizes his inquiry into a tour of five architectural loci: bypasses and flyovers; walls; fences; classrooms; and windows. Like the individual Chinese logographs around which Jonathan Spence builds his chapters in *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, these loci give Mrázek the opportunity to talk about much more than the loci themselves. He begins with the freeways that tower over contemporary Jakarta, linking office buildings, hotels, and megamalls into a web of ultra-modern spaces floating above a sea of *kampung*, traditional neighborhoods. Similarly, colonial modernity created quarantined spaces, sealed off from the “native” (might we not view the post-colonial as, not the rejection, but the fulfillment of the colonial?). The author then moves on to “the Walls,” actually not just to the walls in themselves but to the intimate and not-so-intimate spaces that they enclosed. In the former category were the “pre-modern” washrooms where one scooped water out of tanks to bathe. In the latter category were the “salons,” the rooms for receiving guests where the family’s modernity was on display (including the very modern mini-museums of native antiques and “exotica”). The following chapter, “The Fences” is really more about the modern asphalt roads on which the interviewees sped from their houses to their schools, passing fence after fence, “overwhelmed by the newness of the modern urban and the metropolitan,” “growing accustomed” (as Mrázek quotes George Simmel putting it), “to continual abstractions, to indifference towards that which is spatially closest and to an intimate relationship to that which is spatially far removed.”

The other pole of the interviewees’ childhood existences was the classroom, the destination of their

daily commutes and the window on, and doorway to, their destiny, as individuals and as post-colonial Indonesians. The schools, despite themselves in all but the expressly nationalist Taman Siswa and similar institutions, instilled discipline. This the interviewees actually remember with warm gratitude — a discipline that was so different from what one interviewee, Mr. Hardjonegoro, describes as Javanese “dreaming” or overindulgence in “feeling,” a discipline that was “like learning to fly,” as another, former Air Marshal Omar Dhani (imprisoned after the 1965 counter-coup) portrayed it. It was the colonial school that taught what “freedom” was and produced the leaders that would teach the nation how to be free, proclaiming the lesson like teachers standing at the blackboard.

The tour culminates in a reflection on the Window, actually more on paintings as windows and on painting-making and painting-viewing as the calling into being of new realities (a quintessentially colonial act), whether we are considering the colonial idylls of the “*mooie Indië*” genre or the stirring propaganda posters of the Japanese period. Considering windows, Mrázek asserts as elsewhere that “colonies seemed to have been modern before the modern West truly happened.” This is one of the most exciting theses in his whole book and yet to prove it he would have had to resort to argumentation more grounded in precise chronology than his lyrical, evocative technique provides. What Mrázek does succeed in conveying through a flood of fragments of conversations is the very “feel” of what it was like to “become modern.”

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Vina A. Lanzona. *Amazons of the Huk Rebellion: Gender, Sex and Revolution in the Philippines*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009, 392p.

Vina Lanzona readjusts the historian’s lens when viewing the rebellion by the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (Communist Party of the Philippines, PKP) in the early